

Interlocking Pieces: Housing, Transportation, and Jobs



H o u s i n g C h o i c e s

PRINCIPLE

Housing in Tompkins County should be affordable and appealing to all residents, regardless of their income or whether they rent or own their homes.

Existing Housing Stock

Tompkins County, similar to most upstate rural communities, has a high percentage of older homes, which require more maintenance and upkeep. According to the Tompkins County Assessment Department, 40 percent of the residential housing stock in the county was built before 1940 and another 15 percent was built between 1940 and 1959.

Based on an outdoor visual assessment of properties, which may underestimate the overall quality of housing, approximately 9 percent of the housing stock in the county showed definite signs of deferred maintenance. There is also some evidence that low-income homeowners are having a hard time affording needed repairs. Better Housing for Tompkins County reported that in the summer of 2002 there were over 330 low and very-low income homeowners on waiting lists for housing rehabilitation assistance in just four of the nine towns in the county. This need is anticipated to increase in the future as the housing stock continues to age.

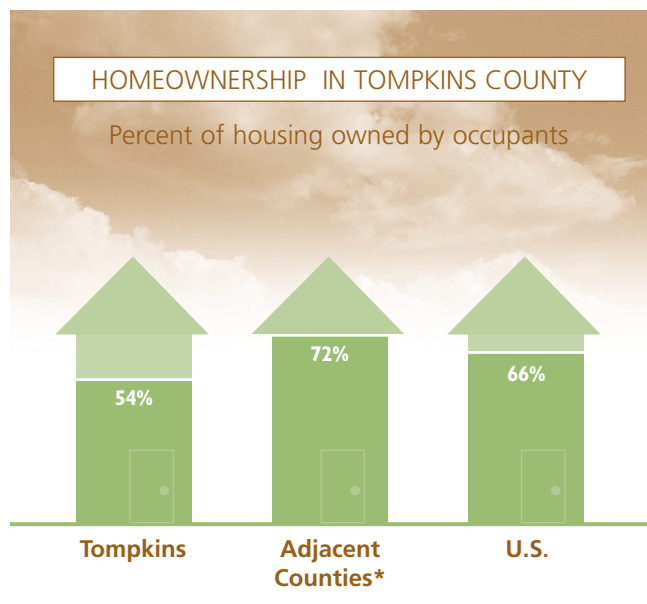
When costly maintenance projects are deferred and homes start to visibly decline, the desirability of a neighborhood and local character can be negatively impacted, leading to diminished property values. Severely dilapidated properties cause further blight in neighborhoods and demolition reduces the overall housing supply, increasing demand for new housing construction. Ensuring that the aging housing stock is maintained and reducing barriers to rehabilitation can revitalize neighborhoods, strengthen community character, and reduce the pressure on open space and farmland to be used for new housing construction.

The High Cost of Housing

Housing statistics in Tompkins County differ in many ways from state and national averages, and even from neighboring counties. Barely half the homes here are owner-occupied, as opposed to two-thirds nationwide; although the homeownership rate of non-student households (64 percent) is closer to the nationwide average. The average homeownership rates in the counties surrounding Tompkins range from 64 percent in Cortland County to 79 percent in Tioga County.

The sales price of a single-family home in Tompkins County has soared in the last few years, from a median of \$100,000 in 2000 to \$134,000 in 2003.⁴ The median sales price here is 50 to 75 percent higher than it is across the county line, in any direction.

Many people in Tompkins County rent their living space, but this also comes at a premium. The median monthly



Source: U.S. Census 2000

*Cayuga 72%
Chemung 69%
Cortland 64%
Schuyler 77%
Seneca 74%
Tioga 78%

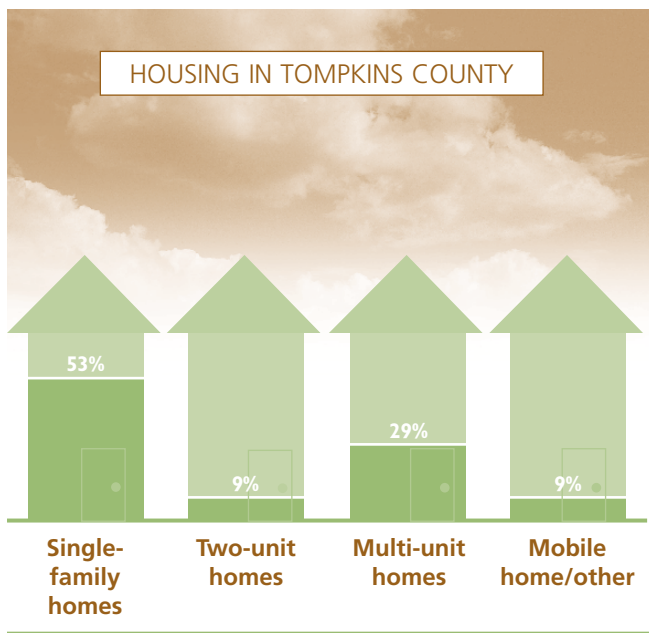
HOUSING COSTS		
Median Rent ¹		Median Sales Price ²
\$611	Tompkins	\$134,000
\$468	Tioga	\$90,000
\$493	Chemung	\$77,900
\$521	Seneca	\$76,900
\$482	Cayuga	\$76,500
\$471	Cortland	\$75,250
\$466	Schuyler	\$79,000

¹ Median monthly rent (2000)

² Median residential sales price (2003)

Sources: U.S. Census 2000; N.Y.S. Association of Realtors

⁴ New York State Association of Realtors



Source: U.S. Census 2000

rental rate per household in 2000 was \$611, the highest in the region. The median rent drops slightly for non-student renters, but it remains the highest in the region at \$580.

A limited supply of housing stock has resulted in hot competition among buyers, which has pushed home prices up. New housing construction, at a median of \$180,000, is generally not affordable to the average household, and there is little economic incentive for contractors to develop affordable housing.

Tompkins County's low vacancy rates for rental units – 4.6 percent countywide, about half that in adjacent counties, and 2.6 percent in the City of Ithaca – create competition for available units and help inflate prices. The large student

The median sales price and rental rate in Tompkins County are the highest in our seven-county region.

population in the county impacts the rental market, particularly near the colleges. A group of four students, for instance, can pool their resources for more purchasing power than a family household.

The number of households is increasing, adding to competition for homes. From 1990 to 2000, the number of separate – and especially one-person – households here went up by nearly 10 percent, while the population grew by a modest 2.6 percent. Senior citizens are living longer and showing a preference to stay in their homes, another factor that reduces turnover in the market.

Barriers to Affordability

Owning a home is widely recognized as one of the most effective ways for Americans to build wealth, but Tompkins County's high-priced housing market makes it difficult for moderate- and low-income families to take advantage of homeownership as a step toward economic security. The high cost of rental housing also prohibits many households from saving for a down payment.

The generally accepted definition of "affordable" is that a household should pay no more than 30 percent of its annual income on housing. At least one in three households in Tompkins County has housing affordability problems.

The median income in Tompkins County in 2000 was \$37,272 per year, differing little from that of surrounding counties, with more than a quarter of all households in the county earning less than \$20,000 a year. The non-student median household income increased to \$43,730 in 2000,

TOMPKINS COUNTY HOUSING FACTS

Occupied housing units in 2000	36,420
Housing units added since 1990	3,287
Rental units in 2000	16,846
Rental units added since 1990	1,935
Mobile homes in 2000	3,671
Mobile homes added since 1990	68
Increase in number of one-person households since 1990	30%
Homes in the county built before 1940	40%
Homes in City of Ithaca built before 1940	82%
Homes showing need for extensive or moderate repairs	9%
Households that spend more than 30 percent of income on housing	40% *
Households that spend more than half of income on housing	20% *

Source: U.S. Census 2000

* Based on sample data; not all households responding.

which is 9 to 21 percent higher than surrounding counties. However, median housing sales prices that are 50 to 75 percent higher here than in surrounding counties impact lower-income residents. Over 10,000 households pay more than 30 percent of their income on housing; over 5,000 spend more than half their income on housing. This cost

About one in three households in Tompkins County has housing affordability problems.

burden is most acute for low-income renters, many of whom are not students. Among non-student renters, nearly 40 percent – close to 4,000 households – pay more than the affordable level for housing.

Rapidly increasing housing costs may be pushing the lowest income households out of the market altogether. Homeless shelter rates in 2000 were the highest in over a decade, and more pressure is being placed on housing assistance providers and social service programs that assist low-income households.

Senior and Special Needs Housing

Affordable housing options will continue to be needed by low and low-moderate income seniors. In 2000, about one-tenth (9,257) of county residents were over age 65, an increase of 10 percent in the last decade. Because of better health care and increasing longevity rates, this group will continue to age and add to housing needs. In just a few years, the baby boom generation will start turning 65. In the years that follow, there will be increasing pressure on housing for seniors age 75 and over that will reach its peak by the 2020s.

Most seniors want to stay in their homes – or “age in place” – as long as they can. As the oldest group ages, its members are showing a strong preference for receiving personal care services in a residential environment rather than a health care setting. Assisted living is the fastest growing and fastest changing sector of senior housing. Private-pay assisted living units have been added to the market, but there is a lack of subsidized units for seniors

Affordability of assisted living facilities and services is a major issue for many seniors.

needing high levels of personal care.

As people age, their incomes tend to decline. Affordability of assisted living facilities and services is a major issue for many seniors. Currently, all of the facilities in Tompkins County that provide high levels of care are high-end options.

Two other residential needs in Tompkins County are permanent housing for individuals needing ongoing, on-site services to be able to live in the community, and housing – such as a single-room occupancy (SRO) community residence – for the mentally ill.

In-Commuters

Tompkins County is a regional job center that attracts employees from throughout the region. The 2000 U.S. Census shows that 2,846 workers drive here from Tioga County; 2,605 from Cortland County; 1,814 from Cayuga County; and 1,603 from Schuyler County. The number of in-commuters from the six counties surrounding Tompkins in 2000 totaled 13,737.

The number of people commuting into Tompkins County for work has increased by 2,531 since 1990. Some of the increase may be due to declining job opportunities in surrounding counties, and/or workers may have family ties and other obligations that keep them from moving closer to their jobs. However, it is widely presumed that many who commute to Tompkins County would live here if they could afford to.

Unless we have housing that is affordable to workers who want to live closer to their places of employment, they will continue to seek housing outside the county and most will need to drive greater distances to reach their places of employment. This adds to traffic congestion, higher transportation costs, long commutes for local workers, wear and tear on our roads and bridges, and costs to maintain our roadways.

Assuring Housing Choice

Tompkins County lacks an adequate supply of affordable housing. Households are spending too much on housing, and both renters and homeowners are cost burdened. The increasing purchase prices and rental rates are pushing the lowest income households out of the market and leaving them to rely on subsidies, substandard or crowded housing, or other strategies such as living in adjacent counties.

Barriers to the creation of new affordable housing include the comparatively lower return on investment of affordable housing projects. Local zoning and building codes may also increase the costs of construction of affordable housing.

Another impediment is the perception that affordable housing will lower adjoining property values and bring with it a host of undesirable characteristics such as drug use and crime. Recent attempts to develop affordable, multi-family housing in Tompkins County have been met with consider-

Tompkins County lacks an adequate supply of affordable housing.

able community opposition, based on this perception. However, there is no statistical link between affordable housing and diminishing property values or increasing crime rates. Residents of affordable housing are usually working people, known to the community.

Changes in household size and household make-up will necessitate a variety of housing options in the future. The increasing number of single-person households, the preference for young couples to wait to have children, and the increase in the over-65 population will all impact the types of housing our communities will need. In the meantime, the current widespread lack of affordable housing hampers the local economy by reducing expenditures on other items, narrowing choices for workers coming here from other areas, and preventing young families or householders from building wealth through homeownership.

Policies

By encouraging changes in how housing is provided, we can assure housing choices that are affordable and appealing to all residents.

It is the policy of Tompkins County to:

- Provide for a variety of quality living experiences, including rural, suburban, hamlet, village, and urban.
- Protect consumers' housing options throughout the county by providing a mix of choices of location, accessibility, housing types, and neighborhood character.
- Provide and encourage more quality rental and owner-occupied affordable housing options for very low-, low-, and moderate-income residents.
- Promote increased owner-occupied housing in the county.
- Maintain an adequate supply of affordable housing options for people with special needs, including seniors who wish to remain in their homes and persons requiring healthcare, custodial care, or supportive services.
- Promote housing opportunities for locally-employed persons who would prefer to live in Tompkins County.

Action Items

Action items are short-term activities that Tompkins County government or community partners can undertake to implement the long-term policies.

- ➔ Produce a three- to five-year affordable housing needs assessment to use as a basis to guide development of appropriate subsidized rental and ownership housing to meet local needs.
- ➔ Conduct a survey of in-commuters to determine the reasons they live outside of Tompkins County.
- ➔ Develop or identify model provisions for land development regulations that encourage affordable housing.
- ➔ Provide education and training programs for elected officials, board members, community leaders, developers and builders, and the general public on the need for and benefits of affordable housing development.
- ➔ Identify subsidized affordable housing units and determine when subsidies expire and if the units are likely to remain affordable. Establish a program to monitor the status of those units to anticipate impending deficiencies.
- ➔ Build a new Community Residence – Single Room Occupancy mental health facility.
- ➔ Develop plans to meet the housing needs of segments of the population that require supportive services, including seniors, independent (or at-risk) youth, and the homeless.

T r a n s p o r t a t i o n C h o i c e s

PRINCIPLE

The efficiency of the highway system should be enhanced and use of public transit, walking, and bicycling should be increased.

The Growing Stress on Our Transportation Systems

Transportation issues are ubiquitous, ranging from a neighborhood wanting a stop sign at a busy intersection to land-use policies that can reduce the use of automobiles. Whatever the scale, every individual in our community is affected by transportation choices.

Transportation infrastructure, including highways and public transit, represents a huge and ongoing public investment. New York State, Tompkins County, and local municipalities struggle to maintain the existing network of roads, bridges, and public transit. Annual transportation expenditures by all levels of government within Tompkins County total about \$35 million.

At the same time, stresses on our transportation systems continue to grow. Low-density suburban and rural development patterns add to the length of trips and the number of vehicles on the road, resulting in increased traffic, congestion, and wear and tear on the infrastructure. This spread out pattern of development, leading residents to live further from daily destinations and conveniences, typically lacks pedestrian and bicycle facilities that encourage physical activity and healthier lifestyles.

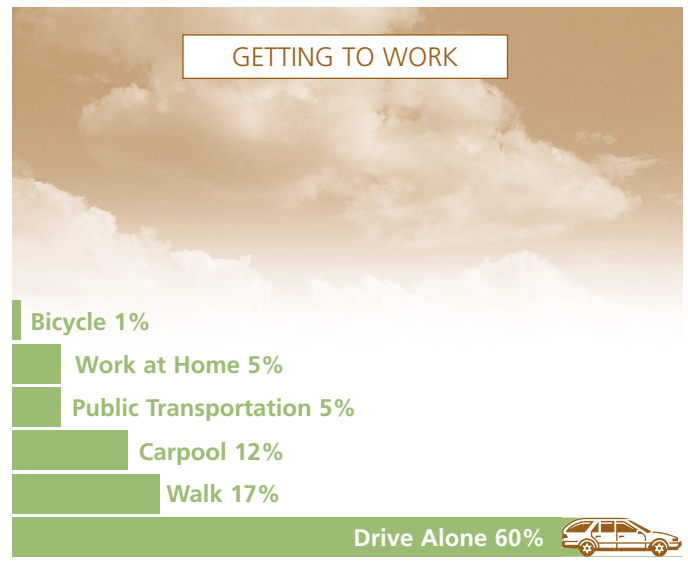
The geography of Tompkins County results in regional and intrastate traffic being funneled through the City of Ithaca. When this pass-through traffic is added to the already high volume of local traffic, it limits the effectiveness of strategies to channel vehicles away from urban neighborhoods in order to help maintain their livability.

Tompkins County is notable for its relatively high use of modes of transportation other than the single occupancy automobile, which may indicate that increased use of alternative modes of transportation is viable here.

How We Get Around

Studying the work trip is a good way to gauge how a community gets around. The 2000 Census reported that 60 percent of the total commuters (and 69 percent of non-students) in the county drove alone to work, as compared to 75 percent nationwide. Fully 40 percent of commuters used alternative modes of transportation, compared to only 25 percent nationwide. Tompkins County also has higher percentages of residents using public transportation, carpooling, walking, and working at home than in New York State as a whole. Non-automobile use is higher in the City of Ithaca and other areas where development is compact.

According to several indicators, bicycle use is increasing in Ithaca and its environs. One measure is the number of bicycles people put on the public transit bike racks located



Source: U.S. Census 2000

on every bus in the Tompkins Consolidated Area Transit bus fleet. In 2002, the bike racks were used for 16,000 individual trips. Additionally, census numbers for 2000 show that 18 percent of Tompkins County residents either walked or rode a bike to work. Public input on transportation issues often focuses on the desire for more and better opportunities to walk, bike, and take public transit. All this leads one to the conclusion that, locally, more emphasis should be placed on alternatives to cars.

Our highway corridors are critical to the economy of Tompkins County. They are the routes used by in-commuters and by virtually all freight service bringing goods into and out of the community. Highway function is diminishing, however, as development extends along the major roadways. Much commercial development, in particular, has occurred as unrelated, dispersed establishments. As a result, each tends to have two or more driveway cuts with few facilities to promote driver or pedestrian access between establishments. This development pattern places a strain on the functionality of the regional highway system. The primary function of arterial highways, which is to move traffic on a regional level, becomes more and more tied up with local traffic access to individual establishments along the length of the highway.

If development patterns continue as they have – and as they are permitted by local zoning regulations – the functioning of our major highways will diminish. This will lead to more traffic congestion, longer commutes, and, in general, more time spent in vehicles. In addition, people with limited access to automotive transportation, such as teenagers, senior citizens, and the physically challenged, will be effectively excluded from these areas.

We can reduce automobile traffic and support alternative modes of transportation by encouraging compact development and by providing affordable housing near employment centers. Doing so will not only promote livable communities, but it will also keep overall transportation maintenance

We can reduce automobile traffic and support alternative modes of transportation by encouraging compact development.

costs down. Even now, caring for our transportation network is a significant cost to taxpayers. If we continue to expand this infrastructure beyond existing population centers, these costs will continue to rise.

Improving facilities for multiple modes of transportation, and focusing development in ways that reduce traffic generation and best utilize existing infrastructure networks, may be the only way we can hope to maintain a safe and functional system to provide mobility for access to jobs, goods, and services. Recognizing that most residents and travelers will continue to rely on the automobile, we need to maintain the functional capacity of our highway infrastructure by making investments in technology and design that increase the efficiency of the existing network. Additions or major modifications to the network should be made only selectively, and should be limited to those areas where transportation issues cannot adequately be addressed by other means. At the same time, we need to build the efficiency and participation rates for alternatives including transit, pedestrians, and bicycling in order to limit the stress on our existing highway network. Such improvements to transportation alternatives will also help to improve mobility for persons, including youth, elderly, low-income, and physically challenged, that do not have the option of relying on an automobile for transportation.

Policies

It is the policy of Tompkins County to:

- Enhance the design function and safety of the existing road network while making investments in technology and design that increase its operating efficiency.
- Make selective additions or modifications to the highway network to address capacity limitations that cannot otherwise be addressed.

- Coordinate land use and infrastructure planning to meet the needs of drivers, pedestrians, bicyclists, transit riders, and community residents.
- Enhance and promote the use of bicycles and walking as viable forms of transportation by supporting the provision of safe public facilities, including multi-use trails, bicycle routes, bicycle lanes, and sidewalks.
- Enhance transportation options and provide facilities that allow passengers to transfer easily and safely from one mode of transportation to another (e.g., biking to bus service).
- Provide affordable and accessible public transportation to important destinations, hamlets and villages, the Ithaca urban area, and points outside the county.
- Promote a transportation system that supports nodal, compact development patterns and reduces negative environmental impacts.

Action Items

Action items are short-term activities that Tompkins County government or community partners can undertake to implement the long-term policies.

- ➔ Develop a bicycle suitability map for Tompkins County.
- ➔ Identify infill opportunities at nodes along transit lines.
- ➔ Develop a countywide State Route 13 Corridor Management Plan.
- ➔ Complete a traffic signal upgrade and intersection evaluation program.
- ➔ Develop a centralized, uniform accident reporting system.
- ➔ Work with municipalities to assess transportation infrastructure needs, including roadways, transit, bicycles, and pedestrians, to support local planning efforts.
- ➔ Facilitate municipal review of local development regulations to address future performance of the transportation system.
- ➔ Implement recommendations in the Freight Transportation Study to minimize negative aspects of freight transportation, while increasing safety.
- ➔ Develop a countywide comprehensive park and ride plan.

J o b s a n d B u s i n e s s

PRINCIPLE

The local economy should be enhanced by building on important community assets, such as a highly educated workforce, an entrepreneurial spirit, dynamic academic institutions, and a high quality of life.

Our Education-Centered Economy

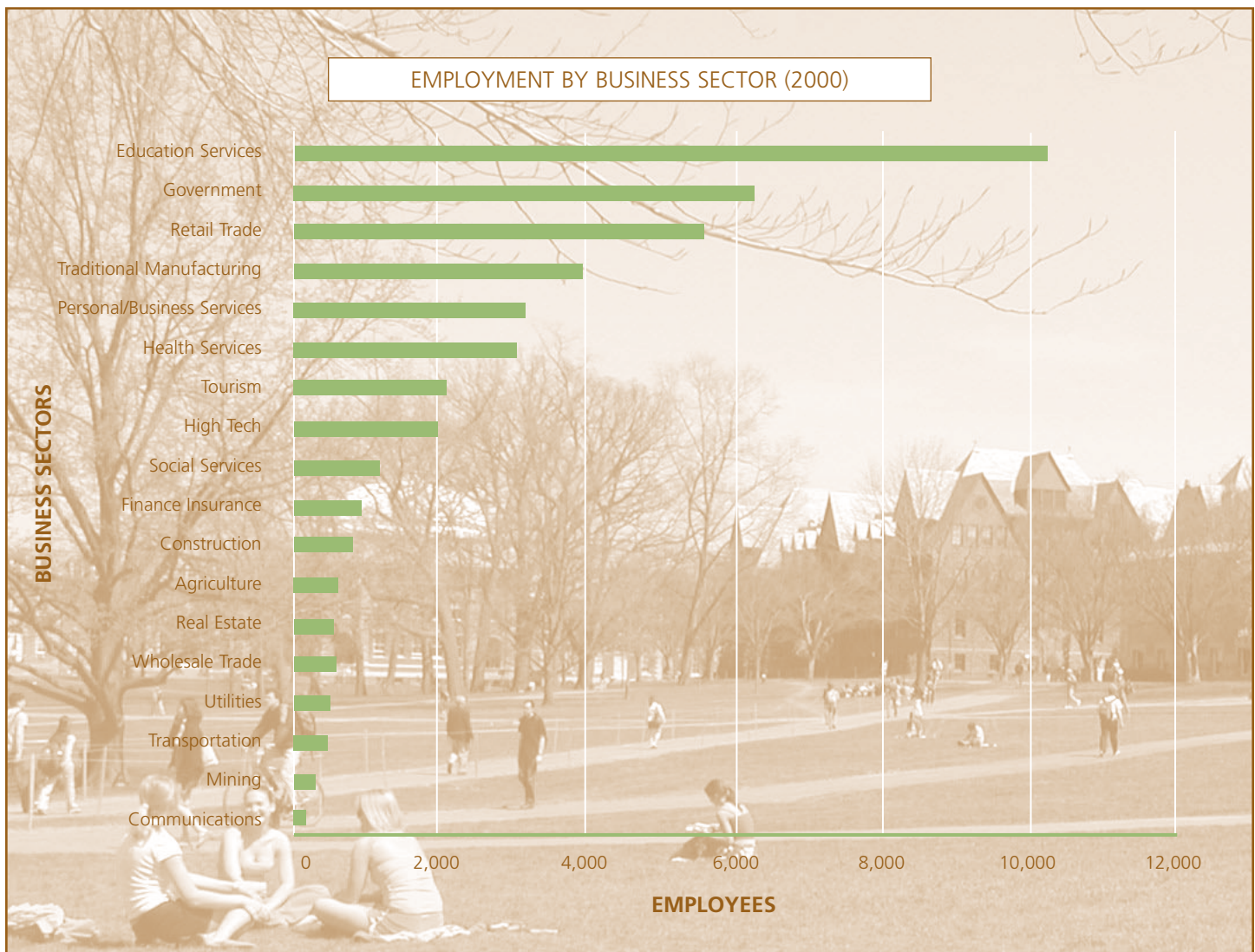
Tompkins County is a regional employment center anchored and stabilized by its largest employer, Cornell University. As host to a thriving higher education sector, the community is an attractive location for technological, creative, and information-related enterprises. The quality of life in the community is greatly enhanced by the human, cultural, and economic resources of higher education institutions and the students and staff they attract.

Our education-dominated economy has experienced job growth at a rate that exceeds most of the rest of Upstate New York, which has contributed to a high incidence of in-commuting. The educated workforce and high quality of life have contributed to job growth. However, the typically low unemployment rate in Tompkins County is in part a statistical anomaly related to the large student population. This characteristic often disguises chronic community problems, such as underemployment and poverty.

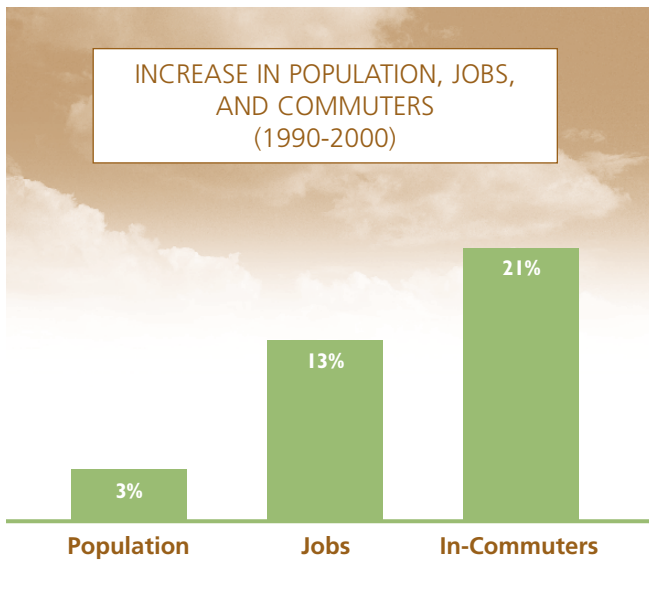
The Local Economic Picture

A picture of the local economy will help us know where we are going and how to get there. In recent years, the economy here has had ups and downs, similar to the rest of the nation. After a period of moderate and steady growth in the 1980s, Tompkins County's economy – like most others in Upstate – declined or was stagnant from 1991 to 1997. A spurt of robust growth from 1998 to 2000 was followed by relatively flat growth from 2001 to 2002 during the national recession. Tompkins County came out of that recession more quickly than much of the rest of the U.S. According to the New York State Department of Labor Statistics, from 1998 to 2003, job growth in Tompkins County outpaced job growth in New York State and the U.S. In addition, the county saw close to 2 percent growth in employment from 2002 to 2003, while the U.S. and New York State continued to lose jobs.

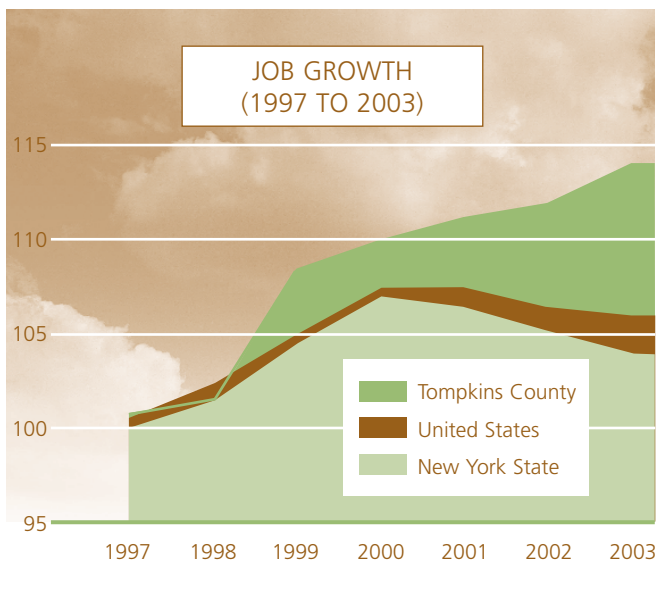
The economic growth or decline of a region depends on



Sources: N.Y.S. Department of Labor; Tompkins County Area Development (for tourism data)



Sources: N.Y.S. Department of Labor; U.S. Census 1990; U.S. Census 2000



Sources: N.Y.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics; N.Y.S. Department of Labor

the outside demand for its products. The economic engine of a region – its economic base – lies with the “export” sectors that sell products and services to others outside the region. Our exports include education, manufactured goods, high-tech products and services, and tourism.

Tompkins County is home to three colleges: Cornell University, Ithaca College, and Tompkins Cortland Community College. According to the New York State Department of Labor Current Employment Survey, for the 10-year period from 1994 to 2003, 74 percent (6,800) of all new jobs in Tompkins County occurred in areas of education, health, and social services. The higher education sector also accounts for 20 percent of the county’s gross product and

Higher education is the largest industry in Tompkins County.

nearly 40 percent of its economic base. The size, stability, and resource value of education helps it maintain its central importance in the economy.

Traditional manufacturing follows in importance, generating about 15 percent of the county’s gross product and almost 30 percent of the economic base. Although restructuring and closure of several large firms reduced employment during the 1980s, strong entrepreneurial activity and a turnaround in the motor vehicles and equipment industries revitalized this sector in the 1990s. Manufacturing, a critical sector, is vulnerable to shrinkage in the local economy. In the midst of a serious loss of manufacturing jobs in the U.S. as a whole, Tompkins County’s loss has been much slower. The county’s 7 percent dip in manufacturing employment from 1999 to 2003 is considerably lower than the nearly 19 percent loss of manufacturing jobs nationwide in the same time period.

Our other export sectors are high tech industries – for example, electronics, software, bio-technology, and research – as well as utilities, agriculture, and tourism. Of these, the technology sector has the strongest growth trend and the most potential to expand, having provided over 10 percent of the local economic base in 2000.

Although a relatively small sector of the local economy, agriculture contributes in many ways to our quality of life. Farmers maintain 30 percent of the county’s land. After many years of decline, the dairy sector stabilized in the late 1990s, and small, innovative farm operations that fill niche markets are bringing new vitality to this sector. The value and importance of agriculture in Tompkins County – and its contributions to the character of the county – are discussed in greater detail in the Rural Resources and Natural Features Sections of this document.

Though also a relatively small sector of our local economy, tourism draws visitors to Tompkins County to such attractions as our state parks and waterfalls, Farmer's Market, Discovery Trail museums, and arts and entertainment venues. Tourism income supports cultural, historical, and commercial resources throughout the county. In addition to these direct contributions, tourism helps diversity and increases the stability of our economy and also attracts workers and businesses to the area.

The County's Economic Development Strategy

In 1999, Tompkins County Area Development (TCAD) released Tompkins County's first economic development strategy. The strategy, which combined comprehensive input from community leaders with extensive research and analysis, points the way to greater economic vitality, stability, diversity, and equity. The Economic Development Strategy is organized around three main goals:

- Build on the economic foundations of Tompkins County. This effort includes strengthening and enhancing our workforce, infrastructure, business resources, and other community resources such as housing, arts, and daycare.
- Create employment and business opportunities. The conventional core of economic development work includes retention, expansion, and start-up support of businesses, with a focus on export industries. It also includes targeted attraction of new businesses and industries to our area. Key sectors are education, manufacturing, high tech, agriculture, and tourism.
- Reflect community values in the economic development process. The importance of our collective community values was regularly expressed during the strategy planning process. Top concerns are: creating opportunity for all; working cooperatively with business, governments, and civic groups as appropriate; building on the county's existing assets; and evaluating economic development work to optimize investments.

Many of the Economic Development Strategy partners are updating their organizational plans. An update of the Strategy, planned for 2005, will be grounded in these efforts. The updated Strategy will emphasize workforce development to ensure that the needs of the unemployed, underemployed, and employers are met through job creation, training, and other employment programs. Cooperative efforts will be pursued with the education sector, which is central to our overall economic health. In the context of national and regional trends the updated Strategy will seek to improve the cost and convenience of air service – a critical aspect of the business climate.

Policies

Economic development efforts in Tompkins County have focused on creating jobs that offer good wages and benefits, supplying the labor force needs of local employers, enhancing the quality of life attributes that assist employers in outside recruitment and employee retention, and maintaining the community infrastructure necessary to retain our status as a regional employment center in Upstate New York.

It is the policy of Tompkins County to:

- Provide a setting where businesses, particularly locally owned ones, can flourish by enhancing the county's natural resources, arts and culture, lively urban core, and vital neighborhoods.
- Support economic development that provides quality employment opportunities to local residents, good wages and benefits, and affordable goods and services.
- Encourage the procurement of goods and services from local farms, businesses, and service providers.
- Support tourism in the area by encouraging local institutions, businesses, and facilities to better plan, coordinate, and expand tourism-related activities locally and regionally.
- Enhance transportation options, including freight and air service, to support business development, while preserving the integrity of existing communities.
- Work closely with the local institutions of higher learning to enhance those institutions' significant and integral contributions to the local economy and community life.

Action Items

Action items are short-term activities that Tompkins County government or community partners can undertake to implement the long-term policies.

- ➔ Complete and implement the workforce development plan, striving to meet the needs of the unemployed and underemployed through job creation activities, and the needs of employers through employment and training programs.
- ➔ Enhance the ability to analyze costs and benefits of projects as well as improve post-project job data collection to determine whether the public purpose of projects is realized.
- ➔ Continue to lobby for State Empire Zone status and explore regional partnerships to share underutilized economic development resources.
- ➔ Continue to explore ways to improve the cost and convenience of air service for county employers, visitors, and local residents.
- ➔ Utilize Cornell University's resources to greater advantage, including: work with Cornell to improve technology transfer, and study feasibility of a business attraction initiative using specific Cornell research and development programs as the key element.
- ➔ Promote and assist in the development of the county's tourism attractions, including cultural, natural, and commercial attractions.
- ➔ Develop a strategy to promote local use and consumption of locally produced goods.
- ➔ Encourage the formation, retention, and expansion of manufacturing and high tech businesses.

Rural Resources

PRINCIPLE

A diversified rural economy centered around the working rural landscapes of farms and forests, and the livelihoods of those who depend upon them, should be preserved and enhanced.

Rural Business Sectors

Many of the issues addressed in the Jobs and Business section of the Plan, and in the County's economic development strategy, are applicable to both urban and rural areas. Outside of the traditional farming and forestry sectors very little data are available about how much rural economic activity specifically contributes to the regional economy. It is largely untracked, but hardly invisible. Driving down rural roads, one can find a number of diverse services offered. This section of the Plan is devoted entirely to the rural resources that are an important component of the regional economy.

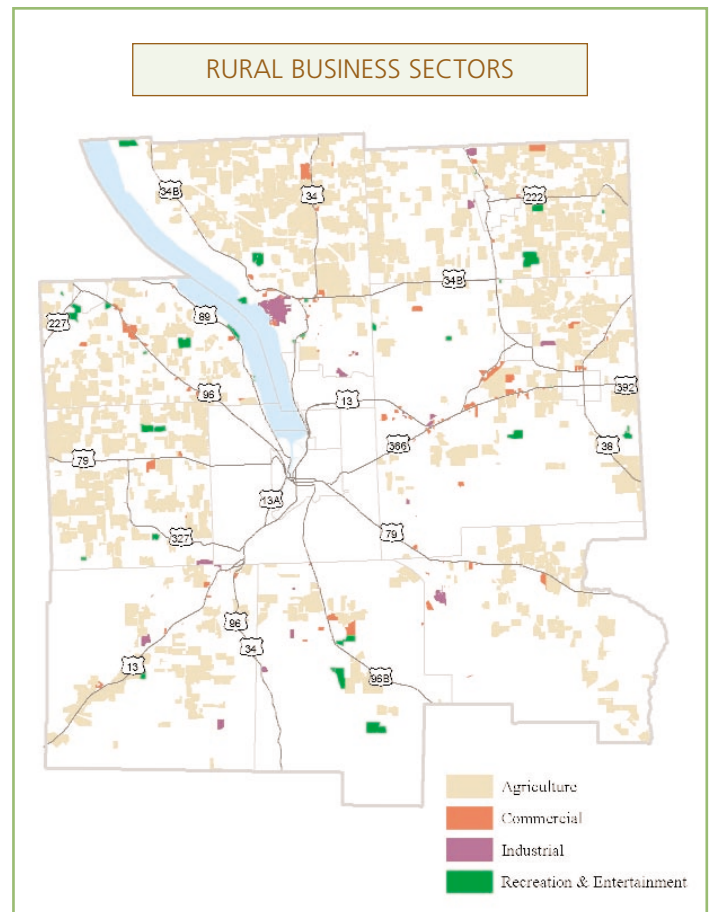
Many resource- and home-based businesses have added to the traditional economic pillars of agriculture and forestry. Self-employment and entrepreneurship have become staples

Self-employment and small business entrepreneurship are staples of Tompkins County's rural economy.

of the rural economy. Although only 37 percent of the population lives there, over half of all self-employed workers in Tompkins County, as identified in the 2000 U.S. Census, live in the rural towns.

Activities that make up Tompkins County's rural economy are found in municipalities with less than 150 people per square mile, in particular the Towns of Lansing, Groton, Dryden, Caroline, Danby, Newfield, Enfield, and Ulysses. This rural economy includes:

- Industries related to the production, processing, marketing, and sales of agricultural and natural resource-based products, such as timber harvesting, sawmills, maple syrup production, farmstands, fruit orchards, nurseries, wineries, fish farms, quarries, animal husbandry, dairy farms, food and herb processing, and feed, seed, and equipment dealers.
- Overnight lodging, restaurants, arts, entertainment, and recreation, such as cafes, taverns, B&Bs, retreat centers, artist studios, and golf courses.
- Small businesses, including retail, many home-based, and professional services such as construction, well drilling, computer technology, website design, consulting, cleaning services, snowplowing, landscaping, daycare, storage facilities, seamstresses, veterinarians, recording studios, fine woodworking and carpentry, and general stores.
- Manufacturing, including turbine blades, garments, and electronic components.



Source: Tompkins County Assessment Department (2000)

Rural Business Growth

Many of the rural areas of Tompkins County offer a high quality of life. They offer a beautiful natural environment with scenic views of natural and working landscapes, a strong sense of community built on neighbors helping neighbors, and are generally quiet, safe, comfortable places to live. Multi-generational families, community organizations, and school-based activities help to create close-knit communities. The quality of life in rural areas also attracts skilled workers employed at the more urban job centers, as well as professionals with home-based businesses and telecommuters where business location does not matter.

Businesses in these areas benefit from lower land and space costs, more room for operations, and easy expansion of facilities or ventures such as experimental cash crops. Rural towns provide easy access to local services and

community facilities, and local banks understand small business customer needs. A localized exchange of goods and services helps keep money in the community. This exchange includes a widespread use of neighborly barter.

Business trends in the rural municipalities include a growth in agriculture in response to a desire among

The County's rural areas are welcoming to small businesses and offer a high quality of life.

Tompkins County residents to buy locally grown and organically grown food. Many municipal comprehensive plans mention the desire to support the viability of agricultural operations, as well as retaining and encouraging entrepreneurs and small business owners in their communities. Service sector employment is also growing. Currently there is a strong focus on enhancing the viability of small firms and start-up businesses. A common theme in many rural towns' comprehensive plans is a desire to enhance existing commercial areas and hamlet centers by promoting existing businesses, attracting new businesses, creating jobs, and improving personal incomes and skill levels.

Challenges

The location of rural businesses comes up often in local comprehensive plans. Concerns are that commercial businesses in rural areas can create visual clutter and dangerous driveway cuts on busy roads, and that even cottage industries can have negative effects on the quality of life in residential neighborhoods. Development of commercial offices and retail establishments scattered outside downtown centers can have negative impacts on quality of life issues, such as noise, hours of operation, traffic, and light pollution.

Despite the welcoming, convenient, and lower-cost business environment in rural areas, challenges to the rural economy are many. They include:

- Lack of access to business support and assistance.
- Less federal and state financial support than in urban areas.
- Inadequate infrastructure, such as roads, water, sewer, high-speed Internet, and cable.
- Inadequate services, such as winter highway maintenance, road signage, and response time in power outages.

- Difficulty in attracting and retaining customers due to lower visibility, lower pedestrian and vehicular traffic, and travel time or conditions.
- Lack of available labor or adequate attractions for workers who might relocate.
- Higher property taxes in New York State than in other rural regions.
- Threats to prime agricultural land by water and sewer infrastructure expansion projects.
- Increases in deer population that negatively impact agriculture and landscaping operations.
- Sometimes confusing development regulations as a result of each county, town, and village having its own rules, codes, fees, and officials.
- Competition from big businesses and "superstores" that carry lower priced goods.
- Degradation of rural character due to more traffic, sprawl, and reduction in natural beauty.
- Regional population loss, especially the loss of young adults.

The nature of the Upstate rural population must also be taken into account. Rural poverty has proven difficult to eradicate. While the expansion of human services in recent decades has improved the lives of many low-income rural residents, poverty remains a very real and in some cases a very isolated plight in rural areas. Business growth can have a positive impact on the incomes of rural people. Business growth in poorer rural areas may be discouraged by the visual evidence of extreme poverty. In addition, some rural residents value, above all, their privacy, peace and quiet, and lack of outside interference. For these reasons, they may be reluctant to apply for government-funded business assistance programs.

Agriculture and the Economy

Farmland makes up nearly a third of Tompkins County's land area. Agriculture and agriculture-related enterprises represent a significant share of the rural economy, and contribute to the quality of life and the scenic countryside that attracts tourists and business to the area. Approximately 230 full-time farms contribute \$50 million annually to the local economy.⁵ Many more people are employed in farm-related jobs, such as transporting and processing farm products and supplying farmers with necessary supplies. The total value of farming in Tompkins County may exceed \$100 million a year.

The diverse farm operations in Tompkins County include dairy, grain, livestock, hay, Christmas trees, vegetables, horticulture, aquaculture, poultry, vineyards, and orchards. Many farms are owned and operated by multi-generation families. Recent trends indicate large and small farms are increasing in numbers, while the traditional mid-sized farms are decreasing. The type of small farms is also changing. In particular, small, part-time farming operations raising livestock, horses, fruits, vegetables, and specialty agricultural and horticultural products have grown.

There is an emerging interest in the link between renewable energy and farming. Wind energy can be harvested and biomass energy can be generated to provide farmers with a long-term source of income. Renewable energy sources, such as solar, can be used on the farm to replace other fuels. Renewable energy can also help reduce pollution, global warming, and dependence on imported fuels.

The Loss of Farmland

Approximately 100,000 acres of land are in farm ownership in the county, with about 80,000 being actively farmed. Since 1982, Tompkins County has lost at least 20 percent of its farmland to both development and abandonment. A recent increase in land being farmed suggests a degree of stabilization in the farmland base locally, but the general trend indicates significant loss in agricultural land resources over time. This is consistent with the statewide trend in agricultural land conversions.

Farmland is being consumed by rural residential, commercial, and sometimes industrial development. Scattered development is common, primarily in the form

of single-family homes along rural roads, or as commercial strip development along highways. These development trends threaten the economic viability of farming by fragmenting the land base and intensifying conflicts between farmers and non-farm neighbors over such issues as noise, dust, odors, and trespassing.

Historic farmland loss is not solely the result of encroaching development. Since the 1950s, over 30,000 acres of Tompkins County farmland has reverted to forest. Much of this loss is the result of abandonment of the more marginal farmland in the county. While the amount of actively farmed land is decreasing, much of this land continues to contribute to the rural economy by providing opportunities for forestry and timber harvesting operations.

The availability of productive land is essential to farm operations. The highest quality soils with greater potential to support agricultural activity and productivity in the county are concentrated in Ulysses, northwestern Enfield, and northern Lansing. The loss of these lands, and farms in general, is often permanent, highlighting the need to develop measures that can effectively protect important agricultural resources and local farms.

Existing Farmland Protection Efforts

Over the past 30 years, Tompkins County government has taken a non-regulatory, incentive-based approach to farmland protection, featuring voluntary participation by landowners in programs. Agricultural districts and the Agriculture and Farmland Protection Plan form the foundation of farmland protection efforts in the county.

There are two agricultural districts in Tompkins County, serving some 340 farms and covering 83,400 acres of farmland. This encompasses the majority of the farmland in the county and approximately 27 percent of the county's total land area. Participation in the agricultural districts program provides farmers with a number of benefits and protections, including protection from nuisance lawsuits, limitations on local regulation of farming structures and practices, tax incentives to keep land in production, and special considerations in local planning and land-use decision-making.

⁵ 1997 Census of Agriculture

The Agriculture and Farmland Protection Plan emphasizes strategies that keep farms profitable as the most effective means of maintaining and protecting farm operations. Prepared in 1998, the plan recommends strategies in three major areas: agricultural economic development, education, and government policies.

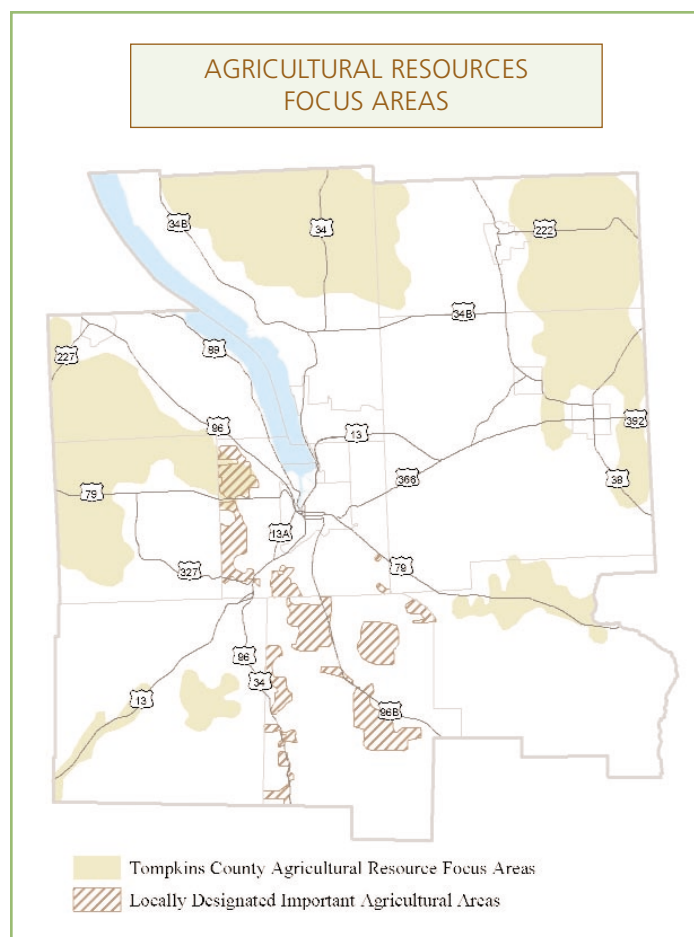
In 2002, the County evaluated using a voluntary conservation easement program to protect agricultural lands. The study identified several areas of the county as strategic in terms of keeping agriculture viable and thriving. In 2004, Tompkins County was awarded state funds to purchase a farmland conservation easement for the long-term protection of a 433-acre farm in one of these strategic areas.

A Strategy for the Future

Agricultural viability in Tompkins County could benefit from a more strategic, coordinated and comprehensive approach to farmland protection. Currently, there is very little coordination between the various levels of government and private interests on issues of development and farmland protection. The existing farmland protection efforts can serve as the foundation to build a more strategic and comprehensive approach to conserving farmland resources.

Although agricultural operations exist throughout the county, several areas are considered to be strategic in terms of keeping agriculture thriving. The Agricultural Resources Focus Areas that were identified in a 2002 countywide study have the best soils and high concentrations of contiguous, actively farmed parcels of land. These areas provide the best opportunity to create a critical mass of protected agricultural land to ensure the long-term viability of agriculture in the area. Nearly all of the land in the Agricultural Resources Focus Areas is within an agricultural district or receives agricultural assessments. Unfortunately, many of the areas are losing farmland due to the creation of frontage lots and nonfarm residential construction or other forms of development pressure.

In addition to the Agricultural Resources Focus Areas, the Towns of Ithaca and Danby have identified locally important agricultural lands that are key to local protection efforts. The Town of Ithaca's Agricultural Land Preservation Program identifies areas of specific farmland resources for preservation through a purchase of development rights program.



Sources: Tompkins County Planning Department, Town of Danby Comprehensive Plan (2003); Town of Ithaca Agricultural Land Preservation Program (1999)

The Town of Danby's Comprehensive Plan prioritizes clusters of historic farm resources according to their contribution to the rural character of the town and their need for preservation.

The Agricultural Resources Focus Areas, along with locally designated important agricultural areas, could form the basis of a countywide approach to foster a long-term commitment to the preservation of agricultural land.

Policies

When considering rural economic development strategies, income enhancement may be just as important as job creation. If we can better nurture the entrepreneurial spirit of rural business owners, there is a greater potential to enhance the incomes of rural residents and increase the standards of living in our rural areas. Filling the gaps in capital and technical expertise needed to support more successful rural businesses will strengthen rural communities. It is also important to preserve and manage the economic and ecological functions of the rural landscapes in ways that are sustainable for agriculture, forestry, recreation, tourism, and maintaining a rural way of life. By encouraging development patterns intended to preserve open space, agricultural land and forest areas, we can protect the beauty and natural environment that make rural living desirable.

It is the policy of Tompkins County to:

- Enhance the viability of existing farming operations and agricultural businesses, and encourage new ones to be formed.
- Support sustainable formal and informal resource-based economic development activities, such as forest management, timber harvesting, and agri-tourism, which support a rural way of life.
- Sustain and enhance the agricultural activities and working farms within the Agricultural Resources Focus Areas identified in the Plan, and within locally designated important agricultural areas.
- Encourage development that is designed to preserve open space and valuable agricultural and forest land.
- Protect prime agricultural land for agricultural use.
- Support community and economic development efforts that enhance the incomes of, or provide services primarily to, rural residents.

Action Items

Action items are short-term activities that Tompkins County government or community partners can undertake to implement the long-term policies.

- ➔ Determine the feasibility of a rural micro-enterprise program, including adding a component to the County's Economic Development Revolving Loan Fund.
- ➔ Update the Agriculture and Farmland Protection Plan with a particular focus on promoting the viability and profitability of agriculture within the county.
- ➔ Establish a program to protect and manage land for agricultural and forestry use in the focus areas identified in the Comprehensive Plan using tools appropriate to the functions of those resources.
- ➔ Develop or identify model performance standards to preserve agriculture and forest land.